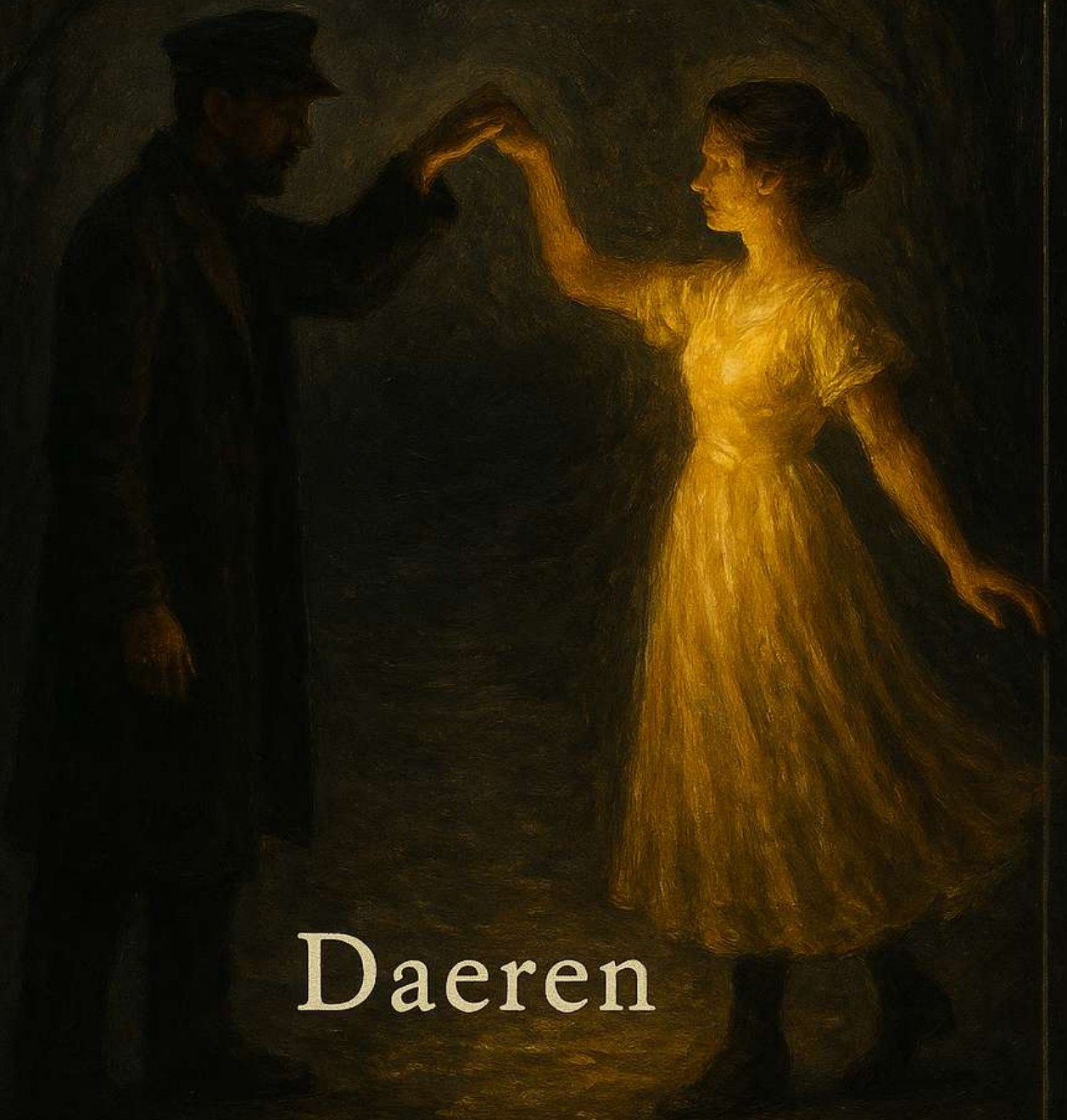


# FROZEN EYES



Daeren

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EYUKOV DAEREN

First Digital Edition

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## Quiet living

I had been living quietly for some time, not the harsh, militaristic kind, but something softer. Not isolated, I want to be clear about that. Isolation suggests something was taken from me, that I was cut off against my will. This was different. This was a choice I had made so gradually that I couldn't remember the exact moment when I stopped trying to be seen.

I went to the same café every morning.

Moretti's. Small place on the corner of Fifth and Brennan. The kind of café that tourists walk past without noticing because the window display never changes and the awning has been the same shade of faded green for what must be fifteen years. Perfect.

The barista was a thin man with graying temples who had mastered the art of functional politeness. He would nod when I entered at exactly 8:23 AM. He would prepare my order—medium dark roast, no sugar, no cream—without my asking.

He would take my exact change and hand me the cup with the same neutral expression he gave to the steam rising from the espresso machine.

We had achieved something beautiful together, this barista and I. A transaction so smooth it felt like choreography. So predictable it had become invisible.

I would sit at the small table by the window. Always the same table. Not because I was territorial about it, but because routine creates a kind of armor. When everything is expected, nothing can surprise you. When nothing can surprise you, you can exist peacefully in the spaces between other people's attention.

From my table, I could watch the morning migration. The same people, walking the same routes, carrying the same expressions they had worn yesterday and would wear tomorrow. There was something comforting about their consistency. Their urgency made my stillness feel intentional rather than accidental.